



Akbayan members protest the 'sale' of the party-list system. Photo: AKBAYAN

WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN

The Party-list and the 2007 Elections

■ By PERCIVAL CENDAÑA*

IF THERE is anything significant about the party-list race in the recent elections, it is the conspicuous change in the terrain of the party-list contest. The change in this case could easily be characterized as “inevitable,” given that the party-list contest is set against the marauding backdrop of Philippine elections.

For one, the ‘Panganiban formula’ has heightened the competition among party-list groups. Since it is only the highest ranking party-list organization that would get the maximum three seats, groups have to pull out all the stops to

land in the top slot. This is quite a change from the past three elections, when garnering a mere six percent (6%) of the total party-list votes was enough to get three (3) seats in Congress.

Secondly, and more importantly, the 2007 elections

has made obvious that the party-list contest could easily succumb to the damning elements of traditional politics. The tide of money politics, patronage and fraud has greatly altered the playing field for groups supposedly vying to represent the disempowered and the marginalized.

Interestingly, the 2007 party-list elections was also defined by the heightened interest and participation of religious groups or their affiliates in the race. This time around the religious hand was invisible no more as religious leaders go all

out, as in out in the open, in the campaign, from sorties to negotiations.

The inception of the party-list system in 1998 was greeted with much optimism from the progressive community. It was seen as a significant inroad to an elite-dominated institution. Through the years, it has been an important site for the assertion of progressive causes and interests. Up to a certain extent, the progressive elements within the party-list in Congress have effectively served as fiscalizing agents in times of great political contradictions. In fact, in the mainstream consciousness pre-May 2007 elections, the party-list was synonymous with the progressives.

But with the bursting incursion of traditional politics coupled with the phenomena of heightened religious participation, the party-list race will never be the same again, as far as the progressive community is concerned.

Malacañang's bets

The 2007 race was by far the most competitive party-list election. Other than the Panganiban formula, further heightening the competition is the higher number of party-list candidates this year. The COMELEC, this time being suddenly benevolent and accommodating, accredited 93 party-list organizations. This is quite a leap from the 64 groups recognized in 2004.

The COMELEC's seeming openhandedness in granting accreditation is not at all surprising especially given the administration's drive to get their own party-list groups in Congress to offset the oppositionist left blocs. In the 2007 elections, at least 20 groups were identified as administration-backed party-list organizations.

Out of the 20, only one has garnered the required two percent to get a seat in congress.

However, it would be wrong to assume that the administration has failed in its intent. It has, in fact, succeeded.

Table 1. PARTY-LIST GROUPS BELIEVED TO HAVE ADMINISTRATION BACKING

NAME	ACRONYM	VOTES	PERCENTAGE
1-United Transport Coalition	1-UTAK	164,813	1.05
Aangat Tayo	AT	187,040	1.19
Agbiag! Timpuyog Ilocano, Inc.	AGBIAG!	50,781	0.32
Aging Pilipino Organization, Inc.	AGING PINOY	16,671	0.11
Ahon Pinoy	AHON	54,476	0.35
Akbay Pinoy OFW-National, Inc.	APOI	79,319	0.51
Aksyon Sambayanan	AKSA	56,859	0.36
Alay sa Bayan ng Malayang Propesyonal at Repormang Kalakal	ABAY PARAK	42,233	0.27
Alliance for Rural Concerns	ARC	373,626	2.38
Alliance for Nationalism and Democracy*	ANAD	188,418	1.20
Angat Ating Kabuhayan Pilipinas, Inc.	ANAK	141,693	0.90
Babae Para sa Kaunlaran	BABAE KA	36,217	0.23
Barangay Association for National Advancement of Transparency	BANAT	175,868	1.12
The True Marcos Loyalist (for God, Country and People) Association of the Philippines, Inc.*	BANTAY	168,459	1.07
Bigkis Pinoy Movement	BIGKIS	77,282	0.49
Biyaheng Pinoy	BP	77,365	0.49
Kasangga sa Kaunlaran, Inc.	ANG KASANGGA	167,437	1.07
Youth League for Peace Advancement	LYPAD	8,436	0.05
United Movement Against Drug*	UNI-MAD	240,744	1.53
You Against Corruption and Poverty	YACAP	275,202	1.75
TOTAL		2,582,939	16.44

*Also backed by the military



Photo: VANESSA RETUERMA

The administration groups crowded the party-list race and raised the threshold. The 2,582,939 votes (16.44 percent of total party-list votes) garnered by the 20 administration groups is more than enough to raise the total number of party-list votes thereby significantly increasing the number of votes needed to reach the two percent bar from 265,000 in 2004 to 315,000 in 2007. The vote increment created by the 20 groups is enough to deprive a legitimate group of a seat or an additional seat.

The sheer number of

entrants is significant enough to affect the results of an election that is based on each organization's percentage share of the total number of votes. Because of the low voter turnout for the party-list, more groups, in effect, fought over a small pie.

Fraudulent competition

The competition in the 2007 party-list race was made even more tougher by the "electoral practices" of traditional politics. The participation of groups led by political elites, both local and

national, drew in massive fraud in the party-list elections. The 2007 elections will be remembered as the election when the political elite took the party-list seriously. Seriously here means pulling every trick from the proverbial hat of election fraud, Philippine-style.

Of course, fraud was not absent in the party-list elections before. The party-list has never been immune from the corrupting elements of Philippine elections. But 2007 is a different case altogether. This time, the cheating was so obvious and brazen that it is now on a par with the cheating in the "more popular" political positions.

The municipal canvass in a number of municipalities in Mindanao show that the party-list turnout was higher than the actual number of registered voters. The turnout in other areas in Mindanao is also very suspicious, almost anomalous. The NCR registered the highest party-list awareness in surveys with a meager 42 percent. But the party-list turnout in Sulu went as high as 98 percent. A

number of provinces in Mindanao, including Zamboanga del Sur, Tawi-tawi and Basilan registered suspiciously high party-list turnout.

Also, vote padding was repeatedly uncovered during the national canvassing at the PICC when provincial statements of votes were compared with municipal certificates of canvass. Padding in Mindanao went as high as 38,000 in a province with 25 towns. It is obvious that it is not only the operators of the “more mainstream” politicians that went shopping for votes in Mindanao, but party-list operators as well.

And if there is shopping, there is money to spend.

So much money to spend

The change in the terrain was most felt in the amount of resources poured in by some party-list groups. Take the case of negotiations with local candidates. The practice before was largely like this: A local candidate woes a party-list group for endorsement and the vote of their members. In exchange, the name of the party-list appears on the sample ballot of the local candidate and gets included in the local candidate’s campaign sorties. The practice now is the other way around: party-list groups “invest” in local candidates in exchange for support.

The investment could be in the form of campaign paraphernalia or campaign contributions. Buhay Party-list, for example, printed sample ballots with the names of local candidates in huge volumes. In Bulacan, they allegedly

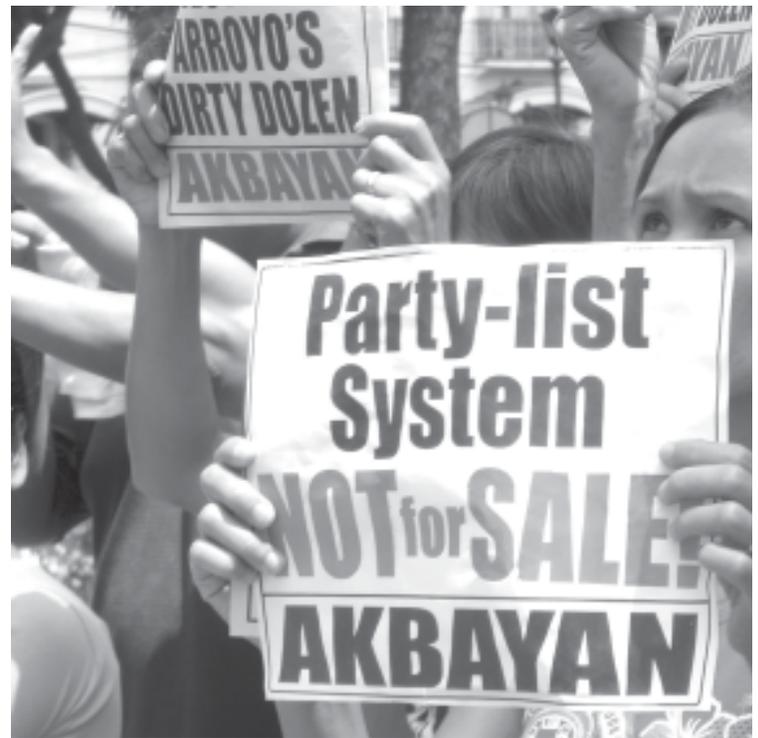
produced P2 million worth of sample ballots and they allegedly did the same in Pampanga and Cavite. A new party-list group gave ten thousand pesos to every barangay captain in Batangas, while another party-list group led by local elites in Northern Luzon gave campaign contributions to mayoralty candidates in Pangasinan and La Union.

In courting voters, some groups resorted to the more traditional way of winning their hearts—buy their votes. In some areas, particularly in Northern Luzon, vote-buying was done in the conventional way of cash in exchange for votes. In Laguna and Batangas, a party-list organization of livestock entrepreneurs distributed meat products to voters. On the eve of the election, a local leader of a left party-list group expressed grave disappointment by saying, “*Ano ang laban natin sa tone-toneladang tocino? Ang meron lang tayo prinsipyo.*”

Whether cash or *tocino*, money politics has raised the level of competition in the party-list. This has debilitating effects on the chances of groups, like left forces, that do not have as much resources to spare. The pouring in of so much resources in the party-list race has greatly altered the playing field. The well-oiled campaign machinery of elite party-list groups significantly eats into the market share of the left especially in their areas of concentration.

New but old

Raising the level of competition in the party-list was the heightened vigor in the



participation of local elites. They saw the party-list as a backdoor to the House of Representatives. These new breed of serious players in the party-list game were organized or supported by political clans like the Tomawis clan’s ALIF or the local business elite like Batangas businessmen’s AGAP. There were also situations when the two elements converged, as in the case of ABONO. The group relied on the machinery of the Ortegas of La Union and the Estrellas of Pangasinan, with the support of trader Rosendo So who is said to be connected with Danding Cojuangco.

Even if the constituency of

the party-list is national in scope, these groups concentrated their efforts in their respective vote-rich areas. Their assumption was that the party-list votes in their area were enough to break into the two percent threshold. Two of them succeeded, ABONO and AGAP.

These groups enjoy the network and, oftentimes, the resources of their patrons, be it a political clan or business. This comparative advantage is difficult to neutralize by competitors who also target their vote-rich bailiwicks. They in effect shut out other groups in their areas of operation. ABONO’s vote delivery in La Union and Pangasinan alone was enough to get them a seat. This is the same with AGAP’s electoral performance in Batangas and Laguna.

Bible-bamboozled

The fiercest competition however came from the most entrenched camp of religious groups, with *El Shaddai’s* Buhay as the runaway winner of the top slot and *Jesus is Lord Movement’s* CIBAC landing on

Table 2. REGIONAL POLITICAL ELITE’S PARTY-LIST GROUPS

NAME	ACRONYM	VOTES	PERCENTAGE
Abono	ABONO	339,888	2.16
Agbiag! Timpuyog Ilocano, Inc.	AGBIAG!	50,781	0.32
An Waray	AN WARAY	315,527	2.01
Ang Laban ng Indiginong Filipino	ALIF	157,111	1.00
Agricultural Sector Alliance of the Philippines, Inc.	AGAP	328,600	2.09
Bahandi sa Kaumahan ug Kadagatan	BAHANDI	46,555	0.30
Kalahi-Advocates for Overseas Filipinos	KALAHI	88,720	0.56
Kapatiran ng mga Nakulong na Walang Sala	KAKUSA	228,770	1.46
TOTAL		1,555,952	9.9



Photo: AKBAYAN

third place with two seats. The religious party-list cluster was the most successful grouping in the recent polls, with all of them hurdling the threshold.

These groups have been very transparent with their religious connections and convictions this election. Bro. Mike Velarde for example was very open in campaigning for Buhay. In a not-so-subtle ploy, he even used Buhay as an acronym for the public's criteria for choosing a candidate. Its singular campaign message was limited to the pro-life/anti-abortion theme consistent with the line of the Catholic Church. BATAS, a party-list group identified with Bro. Ely Soriano's *Ang Dating Daan*, said that one of their primary programs is to distribute free bibles in schools.

The impressive performance of religious groups could be attributed to a number of factors. One could be resources and the other one is their solid machinery. A significant factor could also be their premium negotiating position with local candidates where their flocks are present because of their stature

Table 3. PARTY-LIST GROUPS AFFILIATED WITH RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

NAME	ACRONYM	VOTES	PERCENTAGE
Alagad	ALAGAD	423,071	2.69
Bagong Alyansang Tagapagtaguyod ng Adhikaing Sambayanan	BATAS	384,961	2.45
Buhay Hayaan Yumabong	BUHAY	1,169,165	7.45
Citizens Battle Against Corruption	CIBAC	755,393	4.81
TOTAL		2,732,590	17.4

Table 4. LEFT PARTY-LIST GROUPS

ACRONYM	VOTES	PERCENTAGE	VARIANCE FROM 1994 (%)
AKBAYAN	460,968	2.94	-45.64
ASAP	34,079	0.22	-32.4
AMIN	316,249	2.01	+14.73
ANAKPAWIS	369,023	2.35	-31.01
BAYAN MUNA	976,364	6.22	-19.82
GABRIELA	620,890	3.95	+27.71
KABATAAN*	228,349	1.45	+7.42
PM	116,892	0.74	-74.16
SANLAKAS	97,311	0.62	-48.68
SUARA	103,387	0.66	-54.47
TOTAL	3,543,728	22.56	

*formerly Anak ng Bayan

and the value of their endorsement. Their position and condition truly looks enviable from the viewpoint of less entrenched party-list groups.

'Left' at the disadvantage

The result of the previous election is generally grim as far as the left is concerned. Except for Gabriela and Anak Mindanao (AMIN), the votes of all incumbent party-list groups declined. The decline in votes was as high as 74 percent for

Partido Manggagawa (PM) which eventually cost them their seat in Congress. AKBAYAN lost two seats, Anakpawis lost one, while the previous topnotcher Bayan Muna lost its third seat.

The left had a lot against them this election. First is the vicious anti-left campaign of the administration. This ranged from military harassment to a blanket policy imposed by Malacañang on local administration candidates that barred

them from endorsing left groups. Second, the withholding of pork barrel of incumbent left groups greatly affected their project delivery to their constituencies and their negotiating capacity with local politicians. Third, fraud and money politics brought in by the elite contenders have made competition tougher. All these, plus the greater participation of religious groups, have altered the level of competition and tilted it against the left.

Turning the tide

Some claim that the party-list system has been bastardized, that it is a dead end. But at this point and with the current balance of forces, it is the most that progressive forces have. Even if the left shifts its focus on other positions, the same conditions will still be present. The challenge really is to turn the tide of elite politics in the party-list race and in the elections in general.

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Photo: PEPITO FRIAS